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The Life of John Wesley by John Telford - Chapter 1

ANCESTRY AND PARENTAGE

JOHN WESLEY was born at Epworth Parsonage on June 17th, 1703. A notable ancestry links the founder of Methodism to all the stirring scenes of Nonconformist persecution and controversy during the seventeenth century. Bartholomew Wesley, his great-grandfather, was the son of Sir Herbert Wesley, of Westleigh, Devonshire, and Elizabeth de Wellesley, of Dangan, county Meath, in Ireland. He studied medicine and divinity at Oxford, the university to which his son, grandson, and three great-grandsons afterwards followed him. He married the daughter of Sir Henry Colley, of Kildare, in 1619. Nothing is known about his history till 1640, when he became Rector of Catherston, a little village in the south-west of Dorsetshire. He also held the neighbouring living of Charmouth, but both together only yielded their incumbent an income of 35 10s.

The one event of historic interest in his life is connected with the flight of Charles II. after the battle of Worcester, in September, 1651. It was arranged that Charles should cross over to France from Charmouth. The boat in which he was to reach the vessel that lay waiting for him did not come at the appointed time, so that the party had to stay all night at an inn. In the early morning one of their horses was taken to be shod. The blacksmith declared that its shoes had been made in the north of England. When the ostler said that the party of strangers had sat up all night, suspicion was aroused. The ostler ran to consult Mr. Wesley at the church, but as he was reading prayers, there was considerable delay, and Charles was gone before any measures could be taken to prevent his escape. Bartholomew Wesley made no secret of his intention to capture the King. He told a friend in jest that if ever Charles came back, he would be certain to love long prayers, because "he would have surely snapt him" if the prayers had been over earlier. An account of this scene describes Wesley as the "puny parson." The Rector of Charmouth was therefore a little man, like all the Wesleys.

After the Restoration he was ejected from his living. This trouble fell upon him nearly six months before the general ejection on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662. His skill in medicine, which had formerly enabled him to render signal service to his poor parishioners, now became his sole means of support. His great-grandson John Wesley inherited his love of medicine, and, as we shall see, found his skill of great service to himself and others. For some time after his ejection, Bartholomew Wesley lived quietly among his old parishioners in Charmouth. He cast in his lot with the persecuted Nonconformists, but no violence seems to have been used against a man who had won general respect by his benevolence and his blameless character. He was probably compelled to leave the district after the Five Mile Act was placed on the statute books; but we only know that he did not long survive his son, who died in 1678.

This son bore the name which afterwards became known in every corner of the kingdom"John Wesley, or Westley, as the name was spelled till Samuel Wesley, the Rector of Epworth, dropped the "t." His life forms a painful contrast to that of his illustrious grandson, but their spirit and their aims were one. The first John Wesley was born in 1636. As a schoolboy, he was under deep religious conviction. He had a diary, in which he described all the events of his outward life, as well as the workings of us own heart. This diary, which he kept almost to the lose of his life, was entrusted by his widow to Dr. Calamy. All trace of it is now lost. It would have been no small rivilege to compare it with his grandson's famous journals.

As a student at New Inn Hall, Oxford, his seriousness and diligence remind us much of the Oxford Methodists seventy years later. He applied himself particularly to the study of Oriental languages, in which he made great progress. Dr. Owen, the Vice-Chancellor, had a special regard for the devout and promising young student, who Left the University, about the end of 1657 or the beginning of 1658, a warm supporter of Owen's views on questions of Church government. He did not seek episcopal ordination, but joined himself at Weymouth to a small company of Christian people, called a "gathered Church." Among them he first exercised his gifts as a preacher. He found his way among the fishermen, and at Radipole, a village near Weymouth, formed a little Church. His preaching won general favour among "judicious Christians and able ministers," and led to the conversion of many souls.

In 1658, he found a more important sphere. The Vicar of Winterborn_Whitchurch died, and the people chose him as their pastor.* He was at once approved by the Triers, Cromwell's Board of Commissioners, who examined every candidate for Holy Orders. The village where he now laboured was five miles from Blandford. It seems to have had a population of four or five hundred people. The income was only thirty pounds. An augmentation of 100 a year was indeed promised, but political changes prevented the fulfilment of this promise.

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Shortly after his appointment to this living, in 1659 or 1660 he married Miss White, daughter of the parson of Dorchester. This young lady was the niece of Dr. Fuller, the Church historian, who describes her father "as a grave man, who would yet willingly contribute his shot of facetiousness on any just occasion." He had been persecuted by Laud for preaching against Arminianism and the ceremonies. During the civil war, Prince Rupert's soldiers plundered his house and took away his library. He then fled to London, where he was appointed minister of the Savoy. John White was one of the two assessors appointed to assist Dr. Twisse, the first Chairman of the Westminster Assembly. Dr. Burgess, the other assessor, was his wife's brother, and offered a prayer a full hour long from the pulpit of St. Margaret's when the House of Commons and the Assembly met together to sign the "Solemn League and Covenant." Mr. White was sometime Rector of Lambeth, and was offered the wardenship of New College in 1647; but he refused this post to return to his much-loved flock at Dorchester, among whom he died on July 21st, 1648, at the age of seventy-four.

Miss White had therefore lost her father nearly twelve years before her marriage. The Restoration soon wrecked the peace of their home. In the summer of 1661, the young preacher was committed to prison for not using the Book of Common Prayer in his church. Next year his ministry was brought to an end by the Act of Uniformity. He preached his farewell sermon to a congregation of friends in tears, from the text, "And now brethren, I commend you to God and the word of His grace."

Wesley inserted in his journal for 1765 a long conversation between the first John Wesley and Gilbert Ironside, Bishop of Bristol, in which the young pastor defends his position, and shows that his ministry had both a divine call and a divine blessing. "It may be excused," says John Wesley, "if it appears more remarkable to me, than it will do to an unconcerned person." This dialogue was carefully recorded in the Vicar's manuscript diary. The Bishop dismissed him with the words, "Farewell, good Mr. Wesley." His frank, manly spirit had evidently made the happiest impression. The Bishop's approval did not, however, protect the first John Wesley from his enemies.

The young minister lived sixteen years after the ejection of 1662. When compelled to leave Whitchurch, he wished to settle in Melcombe; but the authorities prohibited his residence there under heavy penalties: a fine of twenty pounds on the owner of any house where he might reside and five shillings a week on himself. The Dissenters of Ilminster, Bridgwater, and Taunton, treated him with great kindness. He frequently preached for Joseph Alleine and Mr. Norman, of Bridgwater, as well as to other Nonconformist congregations. Early in May, 1663, a friend at Preston, near Weymouth, offered him a house rent free. Here he remained some time, seizing every opportunity of doing good that presented itself, until he was invited to become the pastor of a congregation at Poole. This position he seems to have held until his death. Despite all his caution, he was imprisoned four times under the oppressive laws of his day, and was once obliged to hide himself for a considerable time to escape persecution. Dr. Calamy says he was greatly supported in many troubles, and was often seasonably and wonderfully relieved; but the death of many eminent Christians who were his friends and the increasing rage of the enemies of true religion broke down his spirits. His fight with poverty and trouble closed in 1678, at the age of forty-two years.

The founder of Methodism was the true successor of this devoted man. His itinerant ministry, his care for the fisher-folk, his unflinching loyalty to his principles, his success in winning souls, and his simple godly life were all reproduced in his illustrious grandson. The first John Wesley was cautious, moderate, singularly open to conviction. By reading Philip Nye's book on the lawfulness of hearing ministers of the Church of England, his scruples about liturgical service were so far removed that he was able to attend church. He greatly wished to go as a missionary to America, but his purpose was twice foiled by circumstances. That task also was reserved for his more fortunate descendant. His widow survived him for thirty-two years. They had a numerous family, but only the names of four have been preserved. She lived in London during the last years of her life, supported mainly by her sons, Matthew, the London doctor, and Samuel, the Rector of Epworth.

Samuel Wesley was educated at the Free School, Dorchester, until he was fifteen. He was almost fit for the University, but had no means of going there. His Dissenting friends, however, sent him to London, where he was trained for the Nonconformist ministry. He afterwards saw reason to change his views on the points in controversy with the Church of England. Nonconformity had lost its early devotion. The students at the academy where young Wesley was when he resolved to go to Oxford read the lowest books. They were encouraged also to write lampoons on the Church. Samuel Wesley was promised a considerable gratuity if he would translate some Unitarian works, but happily he declined the task when he saw what it was. At the time when he was attracted toward the Church of England, he was living with his mother and an old aunt, whom he would have greatly grieved by any intimation of such feeling. He knew no one belonging to the Established Church who could advise him in his sore perplexity. But Samuel Wesley was equal to any emergency. He earnestly sought God's guidance, calmly weighed all the points at issue, then rose early one morning and set out on foot for Oxford, where he entered himself as a "servitor" at Exeter College.

By this step the Wesley family was again united to the Church which had cast them out. Samuel thus enjoyed the advantages of an Oxford training such as both his father and grandfather had received. For many years his life was a sharp struggle. By indomitable industry he supported himself at the University. He entered with two pounds five shillings in his pocket, and left, at the end of five years, with ten pounds, though during his whole term of residence his family and friends had only given him five shillings. He performed his duties as servitor, composed exercises for other students, gave instruction as a private tutor, and collected all his youthful verses, which were published by John Dunton under the title "Maggots; or, Poems on Several Subjects never before handled." The headings of several pieces may be said to justify this claim to novelty: "The Tame Snake in a Box of Bran," "The Grunting of a Hog," "A Cow's Tail," "A Hat Broke at Cudgels." Such subjects are aptly described as "never before handled" by the muse. It is pleasant to add that the busy student found time to visit the prisoners at the Castle. In later life he often thought of those endeavours to do good with no small satisfaction.

time to visit the prisoners at the Castle. In later life he often thought of those endeavours to do good with no small satisfaction.

Samuel Wesley took his degree as Bachelor of Arts in June, 1688, and his M.A. degree at Cambridge in 1694 On August 7th, 1688 Dr. Sprat, Bishop of Rochester, ordained him deacon at his palace at Bromley. The following February, Dr. Compton, Bishop of London, admitted him to priest's orders in St. Andrew's, Holborn. After holding a curacy at a stipend of twenty-eight pounds a year, he became chaplain on board a man-of-war. Then he took another London curacy. His salary was thirty pounds; his restless pen added thirty pounds more to his income. Such was the condition of his finances when he married Susanna Annesley.

A special providence seems to have presided over the marriage of the mother of the Wesleys. She was both beautiful and accomplished. More than all else, she was a woman of rare judgment and sterling piety. Her mind was both clear and strong. Her husband's heart safely trusted in her during all the troubles of their long married life, and her gifted sons at Oxford felt that her advice on all subjects both of practical and speculative divinity was of the greatest value. Mrs. Wesley's prudent counsels were also of conspicuous service at several crises of the Evangelical Revival.

Susanna Wesley's father was Dr. Samuel Annesley, of the St. Paul of the Nonconformists. He was Vicar of St. Giles, Cripplegate, but was ejected in 1662. He afterwards formed a congregation at Little St. Helen's (now St. Helen's), Bishopsgate Street, which was licensed, after the Declaration of Indulgence, in 1672. The Annesley family was settled in Nottinghamshire before the Conquest. The grandfather of the Nonconformist divine was Viscount Valentia, his uncle was the first Earl of Anglesea. John Wesley's mother was therefore a lady both by birth and breeding, a fact which must not be lost sight of in studying the character of her children. Mrs. Annesley, like the wife of the first John Wesley, was a Miss White. Her father, John White, was also a member of the Assembly of Divines, in which his namesake, the patriarch of Dorchester, was one of the assessors. He was a barrister, much patronised by the Puritans, and, as member for Southwark, took a leading part in the events which led to the execution of Charles I. Susanna Wesley was the twenty-fourth child of this marriage. She was familiar with the whole controversy between the Nonconformists and the Church of England, and the year before Samuel Wesley went to Oxford had calmly weighed the points at issue and cast in her lot with the Church. She was only thirteen years old at the time when she made this important decision. During the year 1682, in which she made this choice, young Samuel Wesley was present at her sister's marriage to John Dunton, the noted bookseller. It is therefore probable that the young people, who thus left the Nonconformity for which their parents had suffered so much, were already attached to each other, and acted in concert in making this momentous change.

The first eighteen months of their married life seem to have been spent in London, where their first child, Samuel, was born in February, 1690; but in August, 1690, Samuel Wesley became Rector of South Ormsby, whence he removed to Epworth early in 1697. Here he remained as Rector for thirty-nine years, until his death in 1735. His work was embittered by the turbulent Fenmen, then almost heathens. A terrible half-century of riot and outrage preceded his appointment. Cornelius Vermuyden, the Dutchman who drained the country, found himself in a nest of hornets. The Fenmen refused to accept compensation for their rights of pasturage, burnt the crops of the foreign settlers, and tried to drown them by laying the whole district under water. Samuel Wesley was not the man to conciliate such unruly people. His first twelve years at Epworth were therefore full of bitter trouble.

This brief notice of Wesley's ancestry will show that he was descended from a long line of English gentry and clergymen. The highest education and the best breeding had been enjoyed by both sides of the house for many generations.

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